

A Stand- Up Guy

By Jennifer Brozak

Hampton native Steve Byrne has a thriving stand-up comedy career and he says he owes it all to his hometown, Pittsburgh.

"I wouldn't be here talking to you right now if it wasn't for my time in Pittsburgh," says Byrne, who now lives in Pasadena with his wife and two-year-old daughter.

Born in New Jersey to a Korean mother and Irish father, Byrne's family moved here when he was 10. After spending a month in a Monroeville hotel that was close to his father's job, the family found a home in Hampton on Hidden Pond Drive.

"I really loved growing up in Hampton," says Byrne, a 1992 graduate of Hampton High School. "I'm very fortunate."

Byrne was the creator and star of the TBS show *Sullivan & Son*. He says he first noticed his penchant for comedy upon his arrival in the 'Burgh.

"It's tough enough to make new friends at that age, let alone with the added pressure of moving to a new city...I was short, scrawny and I had bad acne. I felt out of place. I was confused about the world," he says with a laugh.



Photos by Robyn Von Swank

“If you want to find success in this life, nothing can prepare you for the amount of work you have to do,” says Byrne. “You have to have the drive and the passion for it, because there are a thousand other people who will outwork you... you have to be willing to outwork everyone.”

That all changed on his first day at his new school when he made a kid laugh on the bus.

“I would do ridiculous, physical things and say ironic things just to get attention and meet new people,” he adds. Fittingly, Byrne says he was repeatedly cast as the class clown throughout school.

After graduating from high school, Byrne told his parents that he was ready to move to Los Angeles and become a movie star.

“My dad said, ‘Do me a favor...go to college first. Then I’ll support you in whatever you decide to do.’” Heeding his father’s advice, Byrne enrolled at Kent State to study theater, where he says he put in “minimal effort.”

“I was never cast in one play when I was there. They wanted me to study the classics like Chekhov’s ‘Three Sisters.’ I hated it. I just wanted to watch movies and hang out with my friends,” he laughs.

As luck would have it, Byrne’s parents had moved to New York City his senior year of college. After finishing at Kent State, he joined them. Upon his arrival, he dropped off his luggage at his parents’ house and told them he wouldn’t be back until he found a job. He walked up and down Broadway for hours before venturing into his last stop, Caroline’s Comedy Club. The

manager happened to be there that day.

Byrne told him he was looking for a job and the manager hired him on the spot – but not to tell jokes. The work was humbling; Byrne found himself sweeping floors and answering phones, but the lessons he learned while watching headlining comics every night was invaluable.

Four months later, Byrne finally got on stage for the first time in his life at Stand Up New York.

“I had a good night,” he remembers fondly. “As soon as I walked out, I thought to myself, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life.”

His subsequent performances were not as well received, however. “By the sixth night, I was bombing,” he says. Despite this, he knew from that first experience that he had the potential to get laughs.

“If I hadn’t had a good first night, I’m not sure if I would have pursued it,” says Byrne.

From there, he began honing his craft at open mics throughout the city. He then went on the road, traveling the east

coast, and eventually returning to New York City. He found success at the famed Comedy Cellar, and soon afterward began performing at all of the comedy clubs in New York City.

For seven years, Byrne worked every night of the year including holidays, sometimes performing more than six shows per night! The hard work paid off, leading to appearances on Conan, ABC’s Jimmy Kimmel Live, CBS’s The Late Late Show, and BET’s Comic View. He’s also been on NBC’s The Tonight Show an amazing 10 times! In 2008, Byrne presented a one-hour special, *Steve Byrne’s Happy Hour*, on Comedy Central, followed by two more videos, *The Byrne Identity* and *Champion*.

In 2012, Byrne launched the TV comedy series, *Sullivan & Son* on the TBS network. The show is set in Pittsburgh and routinely paid homage to the city and Byrne’s love of Pittsburgh sports. It just wrapped up its final season on TBS, with the last episode airing in mid-September.

It was fellow actor/comedian, Vince Vaughn who suggested Byrne should write a pilot for his own TV series.

“A two-minute conversation with Vince planted the seed for the show, Sullivan and Son,” says Byrne. “He told me, ‘You know, you should write a show for yourself – trust me, you can do it.’”

Motivated by his confidence in him, Byrne worked on a script for a pilot and presented it to Vaughn a few months later.

“He was surprised that I actually did the work,” Byrne laughs. Vaughn, along with producers Rob Long and Peter Billingsley, helped to retool the pilot.

“The show is my love letter to Pittsburgh,” Byrne says, stating that one day he hopes to permanently “hang his hat” in the city. For now, Byrne remains in Pasadena, close to his work, which has always been a top priority in his life.

“If you want to find success in this life, nothing can prepare you for the amount of work you have to do,” he says. “You have to have the drive and the passion for it, because there are a thousand other people who will outwork you...you have to be willing to outwork everyone.”

He adds, “It’s tough to get in the door, but once you’re in there – it’s even tougher to stay at the party. If you’re not willing to do the work, you should just stay home and sit on your couch.” ■

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